The Bureaucracy of Truth

How Communist governments manage the news

Paul Lendvai

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BURNETT BOOKS – LONDON
WESTVIEW PRESS – BOULDER, COLORADO

First published 1981 by Burnett Books Limited
in association with André Deutsch Limited
105 Great Russell Street London WC1
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Typeset in Great Britain by
King's English Typesetters Limited, Cambridge
and printed by
Lowe & Brydone Printers Limited
Thetford, Norfolk

ISBN 0233 97290 0 (hardback)

Published in the United States of America in 1981 by
Westview Press
5500 Central Avenue
Boulder, Colorado 80301
Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher

ISBN 0-86531 -142-0
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 80-5925

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For Margaret

The censored press has a demoralising effect . . . The government only hears its own voice, knows that it only hears its own voice, yet acts under the illusion that it hears the voice of the people, and demands from the people that they should accept this illusion too. So the people for their part sink partly into political superstition, partly into political disbelief or withdraw completely from civic life and become a rabble . . . Since the people must regard free writings as illegal, they become accustomed to regarding what is illegal as free, freedom as illegal, and what is legal as unfree. Thus the censorship kills civic spirit.

KARL MARX

In a free society everything can be published – and is forgotten because it is all seen at a glance. Under absolutism everything is hidden, but may be divined; that is what makes it interesting.

MARQUIS DE CUSTINE, 1839

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Introduction

ACCORDING TO THE Universal Declaration of Human Rights it is a basic right of all peoples, 'to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers'. This apparently simple principle has become the subject of bitter political and ideological confrontation. Gradually, and to the wider public, imperceptibly, two major developments have combined to project into the centre of the international stage the twin issues of the freedom of the press, and the 'free' versus the 'balanced' flow of information between nations.

The dispute over the first issue derives from the so-called Final Act, a complex, 40,000 word-long document adopted at the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) and signed in Helsinki on 1 August 1975 by the leaders of thirty-three European countries, the US and Canada. The provisions of what *Le Monde* called a 'diplomatic masterpiece' were intended to improve political relations, to ease military tensions, to stimulate trade and the flow of people and ideas between East and West. The actual implementation of the provisions was subsequently reviewed by the signatories in Belgrade during five months of acrimonious public and closed debate from October 1977 to March 1978. Despite reaching a deadlock over the assessment of their respective records of implementation and over future steps, the diplomats finally agreed to hold the next follow-up meeting in Madrid in the autumn of 1980. Of the sixty-two pages of the Final Act only some three and a half deal with information, but conflicting interpretations of these provisions inject an element of permanent polemic into East-West relations.

The second factor keeping the issue of the mass media on

the international agenda is the campaign of the Third World countries against what they perceive as a monopoly of information media by a handful of transnational news agencies, operating from a few industrialised Western countries. The Paris-based UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) seeks to establish ground rules for a 'New Order For Information' to put an end to the alleged world-wide domination of the mass media by the so-called Western model. As part of the Unesco campaign, a small commission, under Sean MacBride, the former Irish Foreign Minister, and a winner of the Nobel and Lenin Peace Prizes, has completed a highly controversial report on communications, the outcome of two years of debate. Despite the fact that the commission made several compromises, the MacBride report is still seen by most Western observers as a potential threat to free and accurate reporting.[1]

Though the first dispute is primarily concerned with East-West relations in Europe, and the second focuses on Unesco's communication policies and the aspirations of the developing countries concerning control over the use of media, the controversies about the freedom of news reporting and access to information constitute an intimate, albeit often ignored, link between the two seemingly disparate exercises in international diplomacy. The literature, supplemented by a steadily growing mass of statistics and official papers, both on communications and the CSCE process, has become enormous, indeed almost unmanageable. Yet for all the publicity it is startling how few people are aware of the character, structure and role of mass media in the 'socialist' countries east of the Elbe. Neither the implications of the negotiating process over East-West détente, nor the potential consequences of the various proposals for a new information order can be properly grasped if one ignores the Soviet bloc's record in what Unesco calls 'responsible, comprehensive and objective reporting'.

Who decides what is communicated in countries where the print and broadcast media are state-owned and treated as 'the sharpest weapon' of the ruling Communist parties in the battle for the minds of the people? What are the accepted criteria, norms or standards for judging what is 'newsworthy'? How is the treatment of the outgoing and incoming

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information controlled and what are the values of the 'gate-keepers', the people who govern news priorities? What is the response of ideologically-structured régimes to the challenge of the communications revolution? Why has the information issue (alongside the much more publicised problems of human rights and human contacts) become one of the dominant elements in the great debate over the Helsinki accords? What does the post-Helsinki and post-Belgrade balance sheet look like on implementation of the provisions for the free dissemination and exchange of information, and those dealing with working conditions for foreign journalists and the access to foreign publications in the participating countries?

These questions are examined in this book, mostly on the basis of primary sources; a considerable part of the information was collected by the author during his time as a journalist in Hungary (1948–1956) and on frequent trips during the past fifteen years or so to the countries of Eastern Europe. I have studied the theory and practice of Communism since 1946, and, since the early sixties, regularly visited all the Soviet bloc countries, and have also spent considerable time in Yugoslavia. During the same period I had ample opportunity to discuss most of the problems described here with well-informed and often highly-placed media representatives, ranging from Central Committee members and chief editors to reporters and sub-editors. On-the-spot coverage of the two months of preparatory discussions and five months of substantive talks at the Belgrade Follow-Up Meeting on the implementation of the CSCE Final Act also contributed to my understanding of the tactical manoeuvring sketched out in the third part of this study. To my journalistic colleagues, for giving me background information, and to the diplomats, for allowing a study of the documents, I am most grateful; they all, of course, have to remain nameless.

The personal element should be mentioned, for it does provide, not only the necessary background and special interest, but also, I believe, a certain feel and understanding which is difficult to acquire from the study of newspapers and archives alone. To understand, for example, some of the reasons for the strikingly different attitudes towards the external and internal flow of information, the media treatment of air crashes and natural disasters and last, but not

least, the implementation of the Helsinki accords, in short to gain a glimpse into the back-stage workings of a state-controlled press, the observer has to consult human sources at first hand, checking and counter-checking their statements.

Though it has become commonplace to warn against sweeping generalisations about a unique Soviet model imposed throughout Eastern Europe by an all-powerful Kremlin, there is still a persistent tendency to lump together the Soviet Union and the smaller Central and East European states: Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland and Romania. It is not just sheer size and military-economic potential that explain the enormous difference between the Soviet Union and its smaller Warsaw Pact partners. The differences in the political climate between the Soviet Union and its allies on the one hand, and between the small east bloc countries themselves on the other, are due to historical differences in the motivation and behaviour patterns of the ruling élites, in attitudes and policies towards the outside world, in press traditions and lifestyles, geographical proximity to the political and cultural centres of the West and widely varying historical and political experiences.

Despite decades of professed adherence to the tenets of Marxism-Leninism and membership of the Soviet-run military and economic bloc, the emphasis is on diversity rather than on uniformity in internal policies. The quest for national identity has proved – not only in the case of Romania – stronger than ideological bonds. Yet, at the same time, the extraordinary difference between the mass media in, say, 'occupied' Hungary and independent-minded Romania is in no small degree due to such 'unideological' factors as the different personalities, public relations style and tactical dexterity of the respective leaders.

But awareness of the manifold variations and differences in communication policies within the bloc as a whole should not make us forget the limits of the experimentation nor overstate its real significance and durability. To equate certain innovations in style and content, increasing professionalisation and sophistication in the mass media of certain countries, with basic changes in the Communist approach to the control and function of the press would be to lose all sense of proportion.

A few words of explanation about the terms used in this study may also be appropriate. For the sake of convenience and brevity, 'East' or 'Soviet (Communist) bloc' will, for the present purpose, always mean the Soviet Union and the six other Warsaw Pact (and Comecon) member states. When dealing with variations in censorship practices, the implementation of the Helsinki accords or the coverage of major events such as, for example, the Pope's visit to Poland, the countries concerned will be dealt with separately. No attempt will be made to analyse the information policies of China and North Korea or of the non-European allies of the Soviet Union: Cuba, Mongolia and Vietnam.

Non-aligned Yugoslavia, though also a one-party system, is of course a very special case. The decades of economic self-management and administrative decentralisation coupled with the opening of frontiers and freedom of movement have produced a press that is in many ways qualitatively different. Thus my general observations on practice – and on the Helsinki accords – will be confined to the Soviet bloc countries. Nevertheless, Yugoslavia's experiences of reporting by Soviet news media as well as the reflection of political and national upheavals in the handling of press control by the party will briefly be examined.

'West' is used to describe the industrialised Western democracies, by no means restricted to the NATO countries, but including such distinctly neutral states as Austria or Switzerland. When dealing with the Belgrade review conference, certain national positions will be singled out. Finally, the Third World will be referred to only in connection with news reporting in bloc media and as a subject for the proselytising efforts of the Prague-based International Organisation of Journalists and the journalist training centres in East Berlin and Budapest.

'The man who ventures to write contemporary history,' Voltaire wrote to Bertin de Rocheret, 'must expect to be attacked both for everything he has said and everything he has not said.' The present book, with all its limitations and imperfections, is to the best of my knowledge the first attempt to combine an analysis of continuity and change in the Communist mass media in theory and practice with the study of the impact of both international broadcasting and the

Helsinki accords, including the implementation debates at and since the Belgrade review conference.

I believe that the matters discussed on the following pages not only affect the daily life of almost 370 million people living in the countries concerned, but also, in one way or another, influence East-West relations and the great international debate on the future of communications. It would be both dishonest and foolish to pretend that there are no restraints on the freedom of the press in Western societies, or to underestimate the increasingly serious threats to independent reporting and the diversity of Western media. But the fact remains that the real or perceived failings of Western news reporting and the international action programme to produce a 'balanced flow of information' are discussed constantly in countless monographs, books and conference papers, while there is a dearth of factual material about Communist information policies in action. Avoiding both Cold War clichés and the temptation to take Communist propaganda messages at face value, this book is meant to be a modest contribution to the study of communication policies; policies which are complex and ambiguous, reflecting both actual conditions in each East European country and changes in the broader context of East-West relations.

The first part of this volume deals with the Communist mass media, their structure, function and control, combining common features and variations in each country. Part Two covers the problems connected with international broadcasting to Eastern Europe, including a description of major broadcasters, audience impact and the countermoves, including jamming, by the Soviet bloc. In Part Three the significance and consequences of the Helsinki accords and the Eastern record of implementation in 1975–80 are described and analysed.

My position on the subjects discussed emerges from the following pages. My main intention is to avoid sweeping generalisations and to provide a truthful and dispassionate account, even of policies and actions which I deplore.

Vienna, 1980

PART I

Communist Mass Media

We need complete, truthful information. And the truth should not depend on whom it is to serve.

V. I. LENIN

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